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ABSTRACT

Although the nongraded school idea has had widespread publicity, there is little general agreement regarding criteria for identifying a nongraded school. There is also little available evidence regarding the permanence of the nongraded organization among schools that adopted the innovation. The project considered here developed and validated criteria for the nongraded school idea. Nongraded schools in every State were surveyed as to the extent to which the criteria were present in their programs. Data were also collected relating to the organization, implementation, and persistence of the idea. Additionally, perceived reasons for discontinuing a nongraded program were surveyed and analyzed. Outcomes of the study offer clarification of the nongraded concept, the extent to which this form of school organization exists, and reasons for apparent success or discontinuance. (Author)

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The Impact of the Nongraded School*

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There is considerable evidence that increasing numbers of school systems are instituting programs labeled as "nongraded". Since the first modern nongraded schools were developed in the early 1930's, each subsequent report indicating survey data has found more schools reporting use of this particular organizational plan. This study has found schools being identified as nongraded in all fifty states and the District of Columbia with one state reporting over a thousand nongraded schools. The evidence seems rather convincing that large numbers of school systems are indeed using plans which are considered nongraded.

There has also been considerable evidence that many schools are only nominally nongraded and that it may not be too uncommon for schools to develop programs with ability grouping or the Joplin Plan but label it "nongraded" for public relations or other reasons.

Contributing to this problem has been the failure of any of the major writers on the subject to state definite criteria which a school

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must meet to indeed be a fully functioning nongraded school. Thus it has not been uncommon for school personnel interested in this type of program to become confused when studying the literature and, even so, when visiting so-called nongraded schools.

It was felt that a strong case could be made for the development of rather clear-cut definitive criteria which educators and lay people alike could use when studying schools or considering changes in the organizational scheme of their own schools. This is not to suggest that all communities would want or should have a nongraded school; nor is this to suggest that all other organizational structures are not good. Rather, the purpose of developing criteria is to serve as a base or guideline for those educators and laymen interested in this type of program.

It was also felt that there existed a strong need for a broad-based survey of schools which went beyond just identifying so-called nongraded schools. As mentioned earlier, there were schools identified as nongraded in every state. When surveyed, it was also discovered that there were schools in every state which met the criteria. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the nongraded idea really has caught on nationally and that people anywhere in the country can test these schools against a set of criteria.

Early in the period in which the authors have been actively involved with nongraded schools, which now goes back more than ten years, one source of frustration was the lack of definitive criteria to identify a valid nongraded school. Any bibliography related to nongraded schools will testify to the horrendous volume of material written about nongraded

schools but there has been almost a total lack of attention to specific criteria which a school must meet to be truly nongraded.

Further, it seemed quite apparent that some valid criteria had to be developed if, on the one hand, the idea was to reach its potential and not be prostituted, and, on the other, educators and laymen interested in the concept were to have essential guidelines in the development and/or evaluation of such programs.

It became clear quite some time ago then, thru study of stated philosophies of nongraded schools and critical analysis of the characteristics of truly nongraded schools that certain features were implied. From this study, a tentative list of criteria was first developed in the mid-Sixties. These were used by the authors in their many contacts with so-called nongraded schools. Considerable informal feedback was received and considered in the on-going evaluation of the criteria. The proposal for this project included the most recent tentative list of eight criteria. After the project was funded, a panel was selected which included representatives of teachers, school principals, curriculum consultants, school superintendents and university personnel, all of whom had had direct experience with nongraded schools and who represented all geographic areas of the nation.

The panel was asked to respond to each of the original criteria and to suggest additional criteria if they wished. On the basis of their responses a final list of ten criteria was developed. These are given on page 7.

Subsequent positive reaction to the criteria by school personnel throughout the country has added further support to the need for criteria and the validity of the criteria selected.

Two questionnaires were developed for use in this project. One was for use with schools identified as nongraded and one for use with schools identified as former nongraded schools.*

It was decided that the questionnaires should seek information relative to two factors. One, of course, dealt with the criteria and was concerned with determining how many schools identified as nongraded were nongraded and how many schools identified as former nongraded schools ever were really nongraded. The second sought information relative to key factors contributing to or detracting from successful implementation and/or operation.

The questionnaire for schools identified as nongraded consisted of two parts. The first part listed the ten criteria and a brief explanation and asked the respondent to indicate whether his school met the criteria and for any explanatory comments. The second part asked for four additional lists of information. Three open-ended responses were sought for each of these four questions:

1. List the three factors which were the most helpful in implementing your program.
2. List the three factors which were problem areas in implementing your program.
3. List the three factors which were the most helpful in operating your program.
4. List the three factors which were problem areas in operating your program.

The questionnaire developed for use with schools identified as former

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* See Appendix A and B.

nongraded schools also had two parts. The first listed the ten criteria and asked the respondent to respond to the following open-ended question:

> List the factors which were most responsible for the termination of your program.

Identification of schools which were nongraded from throughout the country was a key objective of the study. It was decided to use three major sources of information.

The fifty State Departments of Education were considered the best source to insure broad based national coverage. (It was decided to backstop that source by using two additional lists of schools which seemed philosophically very compatible with the nongraded idea.) These were the Individually Guided Education-Multi-Unit School, Elementary (IGE-MUSE) developed in cooperation with the Wisconsin Research and Development Center and the schools affiliated with the I/D/E/A Program of the Kettering Foundation.

Accordingly, letters were sent to the Chief State School Officer in each of the fifty states. Follow-up contact was also made where necessary to insure responses from all fifty states. In addition, a letter was sent to the Superintendent of Schools in Washington, D.C.. Each officer was asked to identify ten schools in his state who were nongraded and had demonstrated the ability to maintain such a program over time. They were also asked to identify schools in their state which had once been nongraded but had since abandoned the program.

Written requests were also sent to the Wisconsin R and D Center and to I/D/E/A asking for a directory of schools affiliated with them and description of their programs. Both groups responded quickly and generously.

In those cases where the State Department of Education identified ten nongraded schools, a questionnaire was routinely sent to each school with a covering letter explaining the project and how the school had been identified.

In those cases where large numbers of schools were identified, a random sample of schools were selected to receive the questionnaire.

For the schools in the IGE-MUSE and I/D/E/A programs, a random sample was selected and questionnaires sent accordingly.

Schools responding who seemed to clearly meet the criteria and thus meet the standard set here for nongraded schools were sent a follow-up request seeking information relative to any evaluation which had been done of their program. This request sought either a copy of any evaluation report or in lieu of that, the name of the investigators, the design of the evaluation and the findings.

For schools identified as former nongraded schools, all such schools so identified were sent a copy of the appropriate questionnaire.

As was mentioned earlier, it was felt that selected schools should be paid an on-site visit to validate the criteria through indepth discussions with practicners in nongraded schools and to insure that respondents were interpreting the criteria in a manner consistent with our interpretations. Accordingly, personal contact was made with State Department of Education and other local school personnel to identify schools in their locale who might be valuable schools for us to visit because of their program or particular stages of development. These schools also represented different

geographic location, different size, different age groups served and included schools in rural, urban and suburban areas.

After schools were identified for on-site visits, personal contact was made with each principal to plan for each visit. For the actual visit, emphasis was placed on discussing the schools program, the key factors in beginning the program and keeping it going, problem areas and any suggestions for others with key staff members. School personnel in all the schools visited were most gracious, and straight-forward.

One result of this study which might be one of the most helpful to the practicioner and the laymen alike is the validation of criteria which a nongraded school must meet to be worthy of the label.

Below are listed the ten criteria, a brief explanation and rationale for each.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A NONGRADED SCHOOL

1. No grade labels. This implies that other types of labels will not be substituted for grade labels...Many so-called nongraded schools merely replaced grade labels with other labels equally as rigid; such as P-1, P-2 to mean first semester of first grade and second semester of first grade. There is considerable evidence that failure to remove all such labels seriously impedes the development of a truly nongraded school.

2. A continuous progress course of study in the skill areas... A course of study in reading and mathematics based on graded materials is not consistent with the philosophy of the nongraded school and presents many impediments to the successful operation of a nongraded program.

3. Organization of the concept subject areas (such as social studies) in a cyclical manner. Pupils of different ages learn the same concepts working together with a variety of materials....The hours of modern social studies and science programs is increasingly on concepts, not content. Content is important but should be the vehicle for teaching concepts. A concept-based program encourages use of a wide variety of materials and can provide the opportunity for considerable multi-age activities.

4. Continuous educational progression of all pupils. There are no grade failures and/or retentions...The research on retention continuous and consistent for over fifty years. The only reasonable conclusion is that retention does not pay. What is needed is more flexibility of time dimensions to provide for a variety of learning styles and paces. But retention or grade-failure is not consistent with a nongraded program.

5. Flexibility in pupil grouping which provides for the creation of groups for specific purposes. This should include intraclass and interclass groups....Every good program includes a certain amount of grouping. Obviously, if there are four children who all need help with the same skill, they should be grouped together for work on it. The key, however, is on grouping for specific purposes with frequent regrouping as need of children change.

6. Multi-age grouping. Pupils of different ages are grouped together using planned heterogeneity....There is reason to believe that the most successful programs are those in which all grade labels are removed and children are placed together in multi-age groups as the basic grouping pattern with planned heterogeneity as the guiding force.

7. Flexibility in instructional program to provide for intrapersonal variabilities. This means the instructional program is adjusted to the child, not the child to the program....Simply stated, when a child and the instructional program are not in concinnity, the program is the thing that gives.

8. Some type of staff organization to facilitate flexible grouping patterns....Flexibility is one of the key factors in successful programs. Some type of team teaching or differentiated staffing can provide needed flexibility in grouping children.

9. An abundance of multi-media materials available. These should be designed to meet a variety of pupil's learning styles and rates....To meet the demands of a continuous progress course of study in the skill areas and the concept approach in social studies and science, a great amount of multi-media materials are essential.

10. A written statement of the school's objectives. These clearly state what the school's goals are....A statement of the school's objectives is very helpful to staff and parents to keep the program on target and to understand what the program is all about.

48% of the nongraded schools surveyed clearly met the criteria of a nongraded school*, 42% met some of the criteria and 10% quite clearly were not nongraded schools in reality.

The analysis of the responses relative to key factors contributing to the successful implementation of a nongraded school showed that the most important factors fairly consistently were, in order of frequency, a staff that wanted to develop a nongraded program and were able to communicate well with each other, parents and community that supported the idea, and board of education and central office personnel that backed the program. Other frequently mentioned factors were inservice education for the staff particularly that done by outside consultants; a dynamic principal who exhibited a lot of leadership ability; materials, facilities and budget to provide added flexibility; team teaching; a curriculum consistent with the nongraded philosophy; not moving into the program too quickly; and a number of miscellaneous factors which seemed to be peculiar to specific situations.

An analysis of the responses relative to the key factors contributing to the successful on-going operation of the program found, perhaps not too suprisingly, that the three most frequently listed factors were also staff commitment, support of parents and community, and backing by the board of education and central office staff. A close contender in fourth place was inservice education for the staff. After those four, there were a wide variety of factors which apparently were significant in certain situations but not significant on any large scale basis.

An analysis of the factors creating the most problems in the implementation of the program showed the three key factors to be, in order of frequency, reluctance of staff to change, lack of support from parents and community, and lack of materials. Other less frequent factors included lack of inservice training, lack of time, lack of funds, lack of space, and removing the old graded concepts.

An analysis of the factors creating the most problem in the on-going operation of the program reflect similar concerns: teacher inflexibility and non-support, lack of adequate in-service education, lack of parent support and insufficient materials. Other factors included lack of adequate support personnel (aides, etc.), lack of time and money, and difficulty of some pupils to adjust to a freer environment.

If one can assume that insufficient materials, lack of funds and inadequate in-service programs are directly related to the level of central office support, there emerges a very sharp pattern when key factors contributing and creating problems are considered together; namely, the commitment of faculty and support of parents and central office staff are clearly the most crucial factors.

Schools using the I.G.E.-MUS/E plan and materials or affiliated with I/D/E/A seem to reflect developmental stages much as schools not so affiliated. That is, some of the schools so identified seemed to be well along on meeting all the criteria and being a truly nongraded school. On the other hand, some of the schools did not appear to be defecto nongraded at this time.

This would seem to suggest that there are certain crucial factors which greatly affect the success of a nongraded program, that the I.G.E.-MUS/E and I/D/E/A models incorporate most of these factors, but it is also possible to develop these factors without affiliation with such groups.

In addition, it was noted that something less than half of the IGE schools identified the IGE model or materials as either key factors in implementing or operating a nongraded program. The I/D/E/A schools

likewise did not identify League affiliation as a key factor to any sizeable proportion.

Less than 1% of the schools meeting the criteria who were surveyed reported any type of program evaluation and less than ten schools reported evaluation studies dealing with objective quantitative data. Although a number of schools reported a lack of proper evaluation to be a key problem, apparently with nongraded schools as with schools in general, there is very little concern on the part of educators with evaluation.

The questionnaire received from schools identified as being former nongraded schools seemed to fall into three general categories. The first group responded that they had never been a nongraded school. The second reported that, as far as they were concerned, they were still nongraded. The third reported that they indeed had been nongraded at one time.

Not much can be said about group one. The questionnaires returned by group two tended to support their contention that they were nongraded. Most of these schools did indeed meet the criteria.

The responses from the former nongraded identified many of the same problems listed earlier; i.e., lack of staff support, problem with parents, or lack of central office commitment. Two additional items did appear, however. One was staff exhaustion; the task was just too demanding. The other was State Department of Education and central office demands that reports on pupils be done by grade level. One wonders if this might not have been just the final straw but at least to some of the responders, it was a key factor.